

Horkheimer and the 'historical situation'

C Engelbrecht
2016

'I don't know what comes *after* death, but what happens
before it takes place in capitalist class society.'
(Max Horkheimer: *Dawn and Decline*, p.39.)

Abstract

Horkheimer's historical situation describes the bourgeois period with its origins in feudal times. It also describes the characteristics of the capitalist system and civic class structure with the rich at the top of society and the reasons and conditions for surplus suffering for the exploited poor at the bottom of that same society. The historicism of the prevailing material conditions and pessimism were at the centre of Horkheimer's forthcoming Critical Theory. Horkheimer's descriptions of historical situations had in mind the search of truth, a just society, and the multidisciplinary ordering of understandings of why societal regression to new low levels of human darkness, took place despite remarkable technological achievements by the early 1920s.

Key words: Adorno, Habermas, Marxism, epoch, bourgeois, exploitation, surplus suffering, colonialism, class, historicism, material conditions, historical situation.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to understand how Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) viewed and described the ever-changing world around him. It deals with his writings up to and including his inaugural lecture that he delivered on 24 January 1931 when he took up the chair of Social Philosophy and the directorship of the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt. To reconstruct Horkheimer's conception of what he termed a 'historical situation' is also to understand his views about historicism.

As a founding member of the Institute in the early 1920s, Horkheimer's contributions to the Institute, and what later became known as Critical Theory, remains important today. In fact '[w]ithout the intellectual figure of Horkheimer, the historical existence of the Frankfurt School would be unthinkable' (Brunkhorst in Benhabid *et. al.* 1993: 67). Similarly, Schäfer described Horkheimer as 'the doyen of critical theory' (Schäfer in Benhabid *et. al.* 1993: 153). According to Horkheimer materialism was capable of diagnosing societal trends without the dogmatic application of orthodox (vulgar) Marxism. He argued that interdisciplinary research and approach to social sciences, could overcome the fragmented specialization of academic disciplines (McCole in Benhabid *et. al.* 1993: 1; Horkheimer 1993: 1–14). For Jürgen Habermas, Horkheimer 'wanted to continue philosophy by other means, namely, the social sciences' (Habermas in Benhabid *et. al.* 1993: 50) and even today, 'Horkheimer's thought is of more than mere antiquarian interest' (Schnädelbach in Benhabid *et. al.* 1993: 282). Horkheimer as member of 'a group and individually, have had a tremendous impact on poststructuralist thought, and anyone familiar with poststructuralist theory in the humanities and social sciences will easily recognize its indebtedness to the Frankfurt School' (Jacobson and Jacobson in Horkheimer 1993: 1).

The next section deals with most of the different words that Horkheimer used to describe different time periods he had in mind. It outlines the technological achievements in view of an idea of unlimited human possibilities. The last part focuses on linking historicism with the prevailing conditions that make up the historical situation that Horkheimer critiqued.

2. Different words, different times

Horkheimer's use of different words to describe the concept 'historical situation' (Horkheimer 1978: 56), is nothing new since historians have been criticised for not updating the meaning of their terminology in line with the changing times or because they have not standardized its meaning. The result is to be content with their ever-changing meanings and inadequacies. Horkheimer saw 'today's world' (Horkheimer 1978: 17, 59, 82) – meaning inter-war Germany of about the end of the 1920s and early 1930s – as 'a world that has become anachronistic' (Shaw in Horkheimer 1978: 13) because it is a world (and country) that has been drifting towards Hitlerism. Five years ago, John Abromeit summarized the situation as follows: 'it was essential to Horkheimer to recognize that all of the theoretical concepts he developed were related in more or less mediated ways to the historical epoch in which he was living – he called this the "bourgeois epoch"' (Abromeit 2011: 3).

In a letter to Rosa Riekher dated 30 November 1921, Horkheimer wrote about a mission he had to fulfil (Horkheimer 2007: 22) and that he had 'little desire to string together in my mind an enormous number of extraneous ideas, indifferent laws, and lifeless facts. I have little desire to conceal my own opinion' (Horkheimer 2007: 21–22). It is therefore not surprising that his 'ultimate aim is the philosophical interpretation of the vicissitudes of human fate' (Horkheimer 1993: 1). Later, in the mid-1940s, Horkheimer and Adorno formulated the aim for their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as follows: 'What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism' (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: xiv). To this end, his terminology reveals a 'set of historical relations whose roots go deeper than the present' (Horkheimer 1993: 313). On the one hand these words unmask ideology, but at the same time indicate that 'utopia is a dream of the "true" and just ordering of life' (Horkheimer 1993: 314). In fact, in January 1931, Horkheimer's inaugural lecture ended with: 'May the guiding impulse of this Institute be the indomitable will unswerving so serve the truth!' (Horkheimer 1993: 14).

When Horkheimer use the term 'historical situation', he also refers to the 'existing society' (Horkheimer 1978: 55), the one 'at the moment' (Horkheimer 1978: 105) of his writing, in other words, the 'present' (Horkheimer 1978: 19, 82, 87). Historical situation also described 'the state of affairs' (Horkheimer 1978: 55) of a 'society as it now is' (Horkheimer 1978: 51) and how that 'present society' (Horkheimer 1978: 50) functions under a 'present system' (Horkheimer 1978: 50). The present system – the capitalist system – is made up of two components: firstly, a 'present economic system' (Horkheimer 1978: 27) and secondly, a 'present social system' (Horkheimer 1978: 45). Some researchers such as Abromeit, have explained how over time, Horkheimer moved away from an economic interpretation to the primacy of the political. This theme falls outside the framework of this article.

‘Present-day mankind’ (Horkheimer 1978: 67) of ‘his age’ (Horkheimer 1978: 59) one can argue, lives in an economic system that regulates life that is typical of a ‘capitalist society’ (Horkheimer 1978: 18). Such society is only a ‘present phase of capitalism’ (Horkheimer 1978: 95–96) in a system that belongs to a particular ‘historical period’ (Horkheimer 1978: 55). This capitalist system houses a specific kind of society – the ‘bourgeois society’ – of a ‘bourgeois era’ (Horkheimer 1978: 87, 191). The bourgeois society’s ‘social system’ (Horkheimer 1978: 45) has its own unique social structure. In his aphorism *The Skyscraper*, Horkheimer (1978: 66) gave a description of this social structure that can be summarized in the following manner:

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feuding tycoons (of different power arrangements) • Lesser magnates, large landowners and their important co-workers • Professionals • Smaller employees, political stooges, the military • Professors • Engineers • Heads of office, to typists • Small existence: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - craftsmen - grocers - farmers • Proletarians: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - most highly paid, skilled workers - unskilled and permanently unemployed workers - the poor, aged and the sick | } | In highly developed capitalist countries. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extended areas of Balkans, India, China and Africa • Coolies¹ • Suffering of animals | } | In colonial territories. |

In Horkheimer’s description of ‘[t]hese days’ (Horkheimer 1978: 59) as an ‘age of unlimited possibilities’ (Horkheimer 1978: 19), the ‘prevailing social conditions’ (Horkheimer 1978: 98) are ‘present social wretchedness’ and humiliation (Horkheimer 1978: 48, 87) for the masses. But what then, if ‘for the sake of progress we now fly in airplanes’ (Horkheimer 2007: 17), are the unlimited possibilities in the 20th century age that Horkheimer referred to?

Horkheimer’s framework of analysis of current issues (in August 1918) in bourgeois (Horkheimer 1993: 13) society was in January 1931 explained in terms of the ‘bourgeois philosophy of history’

¹ This word is applied in its context and not in any derogatory manner.

(Horkheimer 1993: 314). He maintained that the origin of bourgeois philosophy of history could be traced back to when ‘the bourgeois society [...] was in progress of consolidating itself and freeing itself from the fetters of the feudal system’ (Horkheimer 1993: 314). It was only later, during the Renaissance that modern natural science developed. He writes: ‘In its origins, bourgeois science is inextricably linked to the development of technology and industry, and cannot be understood apart from bourgeois society’s domination of nature.’ [...] it is equally based on the domination of human beings by other human beings’ (Horkheimer 1993: 316). In a sense, this makes Horkheimer’s concept of materialism fully historical. Although he was a philosopher and sociologist, all Horkheimer’s writings reveal a strong sense of historical consciousness.

According to Horkheimer, the rise of large-scale industries by the 1920s greatly contributed to the intellectual capacities of European masses. Ironically, their abilities have become so great that their achievements had to be protected from themselves because they applied their achievements in destructive ways to the detriment of society. Human productivity increased, and the skills of the workers developed. These days, people have different levels of expectations. They have the ability to be prompt, are energetic and show endurance in their daily lives and in the workplace. In other words, the scope of human achievements is vast: from being able to master for example a cello, art, sport, poetry, music composition and manufacturing. Photography, telephones and radios ‘have shrunk the world’ (Horkheimer 1978: 17, 19; Horkheimer 2007: 7–8; Engelbrecht 2014c). Through their application ‘the misery of the entire earth’ is there for everyone to see (Horkheimer 1978: 19). In other words already in the 1920s ‘[f]ields of inquiry are unlimited’ (Horkheimer 1978: 20) across the world. Through public education a ‘strict sense for truth and justice (Horkheimer 1978: 27) is possible. ‘English textile workers profit’ at the expense of the exploited (Horkheimer 1978: 29) and in comparison to other beings, ‘man’s position seems enormously privileged’ (Horkheimer 1978: 31). Medicine can prolong life (Horkheimer 1978: 38, 48–49) whilst beneficiaries of ‘big capital’ live comfortable lives (Horkheimer 1978: 49) because money provides and excites (Horkheimer 1978: 80).

But freedom of the whole did not simply equate to ‘a linear progress in positive science, technology and industry’ (Horkheimer 1993: 5). For instance, wealthy young people ride around in their expensive cars, the well-to-do elderly play golf, the rich take expensive holidays and the bourgeois boast about the Rolls-Royce as a status symbol (Horkheimer 1978: 18, 33, 49, 69). The contrasts are stark. Whereas ‘[capital is concerned with profit, the proletariat with the liberation of mankind’ (Horkheimer 1978: 69). For both, the ‘present triumphs’ (Horkheimer 1978: 26). In addition, Horkheimer warned against simplistic interpretations of ‘the crisis-ridden intellectual situation of the present’ (Horkheimer 1993: 129). Science and technology are no magic wands that can pave the way for an enlightened society without any form of domination (Engelbrecht 2014a). Neither would it eradicate all forms of suffering (Engelbrecht 2014b). Instead, ‘today’s present conditions’ are characterised by technically unnecessary preservation of relations of exploitation that

leads to relationships of dependency and social wretchedness (Horkheimer 1978: 48) – in short, conditions of surplus suffering. Societal tensions that therefore exist must be managed. Horkheimer suggests that: ‘Society must then be constructed in a manner that establishes its own interests and those of all its members in a rational fashion: only under this condition is it meaningful for the individuals finding themselves involved in such a project, subjectively and objectively, to organize their lives around it’ (Horkheimer 1993: 25).

The background to the above is that in the early 1920s ‘Horkheimer retained an optimistic hope that humanist socialism might yet be realized in post-Lenin Russia’ (Jay 1996: 19). But ‘after the Moscow purge trials [...] Horkheimer and the others, [...] completely abandoned their hope for the Soviet Union’ (Jay 1996: 20). Future critique of the Soviet Union focused on his rejection of Marxist economic determinism and Russia’s bureaucratic and totalitarian regime. Horkheimer refocused his interpretive emphasis away from economics and replaced them with political questions. Suffice to say that Horkheimer’s life-long friend, Friedrich Pollock’s book *Experiments in Economic planning in the Soviet Union (1917–1927)*, must have influenced Horkheimer’s stance on the primacy of the political. As far as the Soviet Union was concerned, he viewed Soviet ruin and destruction as the affirmation of the present at the expense of the past (Schönle 2008). A second and last example to make the point: when Willem van Reijen and Jan Bransen dealt with the fact that Horkheimer and Adorno consciously replaced an array of their terms in subsequent issues of their now well-known *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 248–252), they made two important points. Firstly, they regarded the subsequent changes by Horkheimer and Adorno as ‘significant’; that new terms were given ‘specific meanings’ following on debates with Frankfurt colleagues, and that some terms were given ‘less charged expressions’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 251). Secondly, although Van Reijen and Bransen argued that Horkheimer and Adorno showed an increased ‘distance from Marxian terminology’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 252), one cannot suggest ‘that Horkheimer and Adorno had thereby turned their backs on Marxian theory altogether’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 252). Instead, Van Reijen and Bransen concluded, ‘[t]he Marxian approach continued to be fundamental to Critical Theory’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 252).

In everyday language terms, a ‘historical situation’ is simply the current circumstances in which a person or group of people finds themselves at any given point in time. Such simple view however, raises some complex questions: e.g. *what* is then not a historical situation? *When* did it start and *where* did it take place? Are there geographical boundaries that pertain to a ‘historical situation’ and did they change? How does one compare e.g. ‘my’ historical situation to ‘yours’? These questions are complicated more by the propensity of so-called historical distance that writers are bound (or claim) to bring to their work (Schmidt in Benhabid *et. al.* 1993: 1). Therefore, to reconstruct the past, let alone a *concept* of the past, does not come without limitations, inherent pitfalls and challenges. Because thinking in itself does not constitute an empirical observation, it is not without cognitive flaws. Instead, the close relationship between language as the locus of thought and research outcomes,

treads a thin line between what really happened in the past and that which is preserved for posterity. In any research undertaking, one needs to be mindful that '[n]o document can tell us more than what the author of the document thought – what he thought had happened, what he thought ought to happen or would happen, or perhaps only what he wanted others to think he thought, or even only what he himself thought he thought' (Carr 1974: 16).

But by the 1920s, mainstream philosophy no longer subscribed to 19th century Kantian beliefs that '[e]verything in nature, whether in the animate or inanimate world, takes place according to rules, although we do not always know these rules' (Kant 2005: 3). Early modern treatment of historicism found in the works of Hegel, had its heyday. His classification of history into Original, Reflective and Philosophical History, distinguished between conceptions of merely collecting general observations illustrated by facts, and the 'other' methods of treating history. Original history then, as practiced by Herodotus and Thucydides, were simply descriptions limited to human deeds, events and states of their societies as seen (observed) by them. This represented a mechanistic transferral of what was passing before them (as external phenomenon) into an internal human conception of fleeting elements of a particular situation. In a half awakened society, legends, ballads and traditions were excluded from this sort of history since they 'are dim and hazy forms of historical apprehension' (Hegel 2004: 1–2). These histories could not have been accurate. They are based on a changed conceptive faculty of the writer in line with his/her spirit and the actions that they narrated.

Reflective history however, differs from Original history in the sense that it is not restricted to the 'the limits of the time to which it relates but whose spirit transcends the present' (Hegel 2004: 4). Hegel further divided Reflective history into three kinds, viz. Universal history, Pragmatical history and Critical history. In Universal history, the *own spirit* dominates, the 'standpoint is more that of cosmopolitan or of national culture' (Hegel 2004: 4). In this sense the 'spirit of the writer is quite other than that of the times of which he treats' (Hegel 2004: 5) and reduces descriptions by using abstractions. In Pragmatical history, the present rises into the mind of the historian. Such history is the reward for the labour of the mind. It takes the occurrences out of the past and 'makes it virtually Present' (Hegel 2004: 6). In concluding, Hegel wrote that one 'Reflective History therefore supersedes another' (Hegel 2004: 7) since each writer believes his own version of the past. The last form of Reflective history is Critical history. This was the prevailing history in Germany at the time of Hegel's writing and is not history per se, 'History of History; a criticism of historical narratives and an investigation of their truth and credibility. Its particularity in point of fact and of intention consists in the acuteness with which the writer extorts something from records which was not in the matters recorded' (Hegel 2004: 7). It is subjective judgements in the form of 'critical treatises' (Hegel 2004: 7) – essentially, historiography.

Finally, Philosophical history is based on the philosophy of history, defined as 'the *thoughtful consideration of it*' (Hegel 2004: 8). Because thought is essential to humans, separating them from all other creatures, subordinate realities around us to facts in sciences. In philosophy however, thought

deals with rational processes. The essence thereof is reason – the substance and essence of its own existence that nourishes itself, and is its own basis for its own existence (Hegel 2004: 9).

At the end of Horkheimer's career, his perspectives were very different from those originally acquired during his early student years. German society in the early 1970s, as was the whole world, was remarkably different from that of the immediate post-World War I years that influenced the young Horkheimer. On 17 December 1972, a few months before Horkheimer's death, he wrote to Herbert and Inge Marcuse: 'Let us hope we'll finally see each other well again in 1973. I'm already quite old and am getting more and more stupid' to which Marcuse replied in January 1973: 'No, Max – we're not getting more and more stupid, but this world is terrible and is becoming more terrible, "beyond our capacity of imagination"' (Horkheimer 2007: 374).

Almost at the end of the 20th century, and taking Fukuyama as an example, historical perspectivism accepts historicism's implicit position of the contemporary. It embodies human attitudes, separated by culture and experience, the unmasking of false consciousness and that present human 'desires are conditioned by our social milieu' are created by ourselves (Fukuyama 2006: 62–63). But, Adorno reminds us that '[t]o think is to identify' and that 'the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived' (Adorno 2007: 5). It is on this basis that there is now a need to place Horkheimer's historicism in place.

3. Horkheimer's 'historical situation' and historicism

Horkheimer's concept of the 'historical situation' needs to be placed in the broader context of another concept – historicism. By historicism we understand the belief that every age can and should be understood in its own terms. Students differ on what those terms are. This does not rule out the possibility of making meaningful comparisons across historical periods. To historicize is to interpret something as a product of past historical and present development. It is a theory of historical interpretation, e.g. the conditions of the German working class (Engelbrecht 2015).

The concept *Verstehen* relates to understanding that rules out unnecessary relativism because we rely on independent and empirical means of validating claims about society. The intention is neither to evaluate society from the outside nor to apply scientific positivistic principles. Rather, *Verstehen* is the process of understanding meanings and meaningful action. The challenge is to understand and unpack the meaning that Horkheimer gave to 'historical situation', what the meanings to their actions are, what purposes it serve and what ends he believed they serve by their actions. Interpretation and explanation reconcile their causal nature. Historicism is not shielded from general laws, nor do they escape the impact of human choice. It treats each historical epoch as being unique in its own (individual) character and related culture. In this way historical periods are understood independently from one another and as a result there is no conflict with the term 'present'. Our application of

historicism is not in the orthodox Marxist context of universal economic patterns able to predict the future in a law-like manner. As a result the existence of laws and their applications are not compromised. It includes humanism and seeks to understand change and development over time. In so doing, it is a *method* of interpretation and uses historical detail and or material to make or appear them to be of historical nature. In essence, a historical function was performed in its historical context.

Contextualization and historicization are analytical categories that allow researchers to present a particular perspective about their research and to self-evaluate the claims made and conclusions drawn. In other words, researchers ‘position’ their arguments and are given the opportunity to explain *why* they have said what they did in an effort to place these claims in the bigger picture within their topic. Thus, contextualization of the explanation reveals the topic’s social environment in history and speculates how this environment probably has shaped the topic. It makes the background against which the research has taken place, less complicated. Althusser for instance, described this as ‘*absolute historicism*’ and how humanist and historicist interpretation reacted against mechanicism and economism of the Second International (Althusser and Balibar 2009: 132–133). Historical sciences ‘applies to a given, present, historical object, an object that has evolved as a result of past history’ (Althusser and Balibar 2009: 136). Humans think within the confines of their present and Horkheimer’s conception of the ‘historical situation’ reflects such.

Admittedly, historicism has many different, even contradictory meanings. Some would advise not to use them at all. Horkheimer felt the same about metaphysics (Horkheimer 1978: 45). The reality is that such short cut will not suffice, since, historicism is well entrenched in literature and, on a practical level, is useful for analysis. Historicism encompasses the view that nature, mankind and society is in constant motion and change. How the world is perceived, structures our thoughts thereof and formulates our ideas. Historicism today does not necessarily equate change to progress that links human ideas to historical cognition. As a result absolute principles are negated. In a sense, everything that exists is interpreted from a historical viewpoint that *is*, in fact, history in the making (Schaff 1976: 152–156).

Despite Popper’s treatment of historicism, the point remains that social science is history that cannot escape social engineering (Popper 2007: 40). In this regard, Popper wrote that ‘the historical method consists, simply, in trying to find out what other people have thought and said about the problem in hand: why they had to face it: how they formulated it: how they tried to solve it. This seems to me important because it is part of the general method of rational discussion’ (Popper 2009a: xx). Popper agreed with Marxists that ‘the social problems of our time are urgent’ (Popper 2009b: 453). This practical relationship of social sciences to their present is a central theme in Horkheimer’s inaugural lecture in January 1931. In the early 1970s it became the centre piece of Habermas’s thinking in *Theory and Practice* when he wrote: ‘[h]istorical materialism can be understood as a theory of society conceived with a practical intent’ (Habermas 1974: 3).

There is also an air of presentism associated with historicism. Every immanent present has its own unique past. It is from the present that a history is created of the past based on the understanding of those thoughts and actions. It is based on knowledge and the historical image we study and is an image of the historian's own imagination – thus Collingwood's view that 'all history is a history of thought' (Schaff 1976: 88) means that historians need to contend with 'the presuppositions of a certain form of inquiry at a particular historic period' (Passmore 1966: 307). No doubt, in particular periods of history, particular philosophical problems were investigated according to the particular characteristics of human life and prevailing thought at the time (Collingwood in Meyerhoff 1959: 66). Lovejoy wrote that '[h]istoriography [...] though it is (largely) about past events, is itself a present event, and both the selections and the interpretations are determined by present causes or motives operating in the mind of the historian, and of the historian as representative of a particular "period"' (Lovejoy in Meyerhoff 1959: 174). Answers about the past consciously or unconsciously 'reflects our own position in time, and forms part of our answer to the broader question what view we take of the society in which we live' (Carr 1974: 8).

Horkheimer was well aware of the problems that surrounded historicism. For instance, during one's life course, he wrote, that the impressions that came from the external world (environment), developed into a full self-consciousness by humans about humans in their world. It is suggested that Horkheimer meant that we take note of the outside influences from our world and take stock thereof. He was, for instance, critical of those philosophers who, instead of pursuing truth, engaged in superficial philosophical discussions merely to advance their own careers – in other words, merely to get ahead in life (Horkheimer 1978: 17, 20). Furthermore, Horkheimer shows through his treatment of the unity of theory and practice, that logic does not exist independently from its content because in real life there is no such thing as an impartial logic (Horkheimer 1978: 21). This partiality stems from the influences from the external world. The masses however, simply want to overcome their daily unnecessary suffering, while the bourgeoisie on the other hand, live comfortable lives. Therefore, the present prevails because understanding of the past takes place in the present (Horkheimer 1978: 26). The following long quote explains this situation best when Horkheimer wrote that today's '[f]ormalism of contemporary thought, its relativism and *historicism*, the assimilation to the prevailing consciousness which begins the moment a great thought appears, the reification of all of life as chapters in history and sociology, have accustomed us to merely take note of contents and substance instead of taking them seriously that all of them can live in peace with present conditions, i.e., with capitalist ideology' (Horkheimer 1978: 26) – he also termed it as 'the present economic system' (Horkheimer 1978: 27). This quote makes at least the following points: firstly his reference to formalistic thought, meaning prevailing traditional theory; secondly, the contemporaneousness of thought; thirdly, the pitfalls of relativism of knowledge, and the historicity thereof that competing knowledge coexists (meaning interdisciplinary knowledge sensibly arrived at); he hinted at periods in history and lastly, that we currently live in a capitalistic economic society.

Horkheimer warned about the shortcomings of terminology and scientific categories in absolute terms. When a theory wants to purify – meaning to clarify or elucidate – then *any* theory can be put forward, simply because of the superficial and swift transformations of any categories that can be justified (Horkheimer 1978: 24–25) in order to do so. According to him, interdisciplinary research would overcome these shortcomings and those of vulgar Marxist conceptualisations. He was critical that ‘these days’ all too easy and superficial conclusions are arrived at just for the sake of academic competition. In this regards Horkheimer wrote: ‘the question today is to organize investigations stimulated by contemporary philosophical problems in which philosophers, sociologists, economists, historians, and psychologists are brought together in permanent collaboration to undertake in common that which can be carried out individually in the laboratory in other fields’ (Horkheimer in Horkheimer 1993: 9).

When history is divided into periods as matter-of-fact, human-made ‘hypothesis or a tool of thought, valid in so far as it is illuminating, and dependent for its validity on interpretation’ (Carr 1974: 60), are of limited use. This makes the understanding of Horkheimer’s periodization difficult, because again, Horkheimer used a number of terms to describe periods of time: e.g. age, epoch, bourgeois epoch, contemporary epoch, or the modern age. By exception, he used the term ‘20th century’ (Horkheimer 1972: 132). In essence, bourgeois period, epoch or age describes the prevailing terms, conditions and characteristics of the historical situation when Horkheimer referred to his age, or as the present times of society, as it now is.

How things are today are because of the consequence of history. Intellectual landscapes keep changing and the general state of knowledge is restructured as doctrines become irrelevant. For instance, in the Middle Ages authors of so-called heresy were banished to hell and the saints were the protectors of the church. However, today’s European imperialism is the protector in a particular and self-propelling manner. Capitalism is seemingly more tolerant because it praises productivity, but rejects the negatives that it simultaneously brings about, e.g. exploitation, poverty and inequalities, to name a few. In this sense the present conditions of capitalist ideology accommodate the good (for the bourgeoisie) and the bad (for the proletariat). They are also different from one another in the manner that the present crises persists (Horkheimer 1978: 25–26) because there is no end to the cycle. It represents un-philosophical guises of the present economic system. Of course capitalist society transforms over time but still leaves the prevailing economic relationships unchanged. The capitalist system in its present phase has been unable to do away with all forms of human suffering (Horkheimer 1978: 27–28). Under such conditions moral imperatives do not satisfy most primitive needs. Philosophical promises to such needs are nothing less than ideological concealments of bad materialistic practices and a hideout for botched theory.

It is clear that today’s capitalist system, under which Horkheimer lived and critiqued, is well-organized exploitation on a world-wide scale. This affects everything and everyone despite its human and technical capacities that can abolish all manifestations of suffering from society. The only

obstacle in the way of eradicating inequalities and senseless suffering, is the stark reality of property relations. Bourgeois capital, without accumulation, is impossible. In addition, the capitalist ideology that underlines the exploitive conditions reflects the material base of its own false theory. This exposes the present social system as outdated. As a result there can be no justification for the continued upholding of such system. Furthermore, its existence is evil since the people who hold high positions in capitalist bourgeois society, are 'horrible' because technically, there are better alternatives under which to live. At the same time, modern socialism is a good one because dialectically speaking it includes elements of a better future society. This means that the capitalist system carries in itself the seeds for human action against itself but they also act against other humans (Horkheimer 1987: 28–31). Life is therefore a constant struggle – a struggle about property relations – and the efforts to retain one's place in society not to be pushed out to the edges thereof. For instance, present-day anti-Semitism and the material base of human conditions are not independent from capitalist interests (Horkheimer 1978: 43–44). Material conditions shape humans – their needs, anxieties, interests and joys that reflect their existence. The ups and downs for the capitalist living a high life, is irrelevant because money provides. For the less-fortunate, life is not so simple. Even psychic reactions and character depends on material conditions. In present society, individual development and education in families and schools are more favourable where higher social levels or objective conditions prevail – the master keeps himself busy with productive issues that matter, and the subordinate, with mundane things (Horkheimer 1978: 46–47). Today's society is badly ordered because it is wrong to 'measure the success of a life by what someone is and has' (Horkheimer 1978: 57–58), in other words, only by material considerations.

Horkheimer also criticized the present-day system that is alleged to be free and liberal. This cannot be. If an individual cannot get a job because of e.g. adverse economic circumstances, then that person is not really free from the limitations of the material conditions. Instead, a person becomes a statistic in the pool of surplus people. The system is also not liberal enough to offer alternative arrangements to make work available. Thus, the material conditions have not improved. Instead, the reverse is true. Freedom is further restricted to being subject to economic booms, financial crashes, inflation and wars – phenomena over which the individual has no control. Freedom therefore only exists where production is in harmony with the interests of the producer (Horkheimer 1978: 50–51). Take work as an example: capacity for work – that is, either as human fate or as a foundation for success, is closely related to the extent that the individual can identify with the powers to be that are prevailing in 'this world' (Horkheimer 1978: 58–59). When he feels at one with the existing society and can accept its norms, his career will be successful (Horkheimer 1978: 55). Some academics, he observed, pursue truth for the sake of advancing their careers with little or no interest in the past or present (Horkheimer 1978: 53).

But to have an active interest in the present, is to know the present, is to be in it – inextricably linked to 'now'. Horkheimer gave the example of a penitentiary: one can only know it if you were

locked up in it. This shows the close relationship between proof and experience (Horkheimer 1978: 31). A detailed understanding of the 'historical situation' will change and enhance insight into individuals and their historical situations that they live/d in (Horkheimer 1978: 56). For instance, the current socialist order can only remain historically possible if it recognises logic in its own history, and if they had people trained in theory committed to make their lives better (Horkheimer 1978: 37) – people who do not place their own narrow economic interests first. This represents acts in harmony with socialist principles. This is different to what is currently happening in the prevailing bourgeois order. In the prevailing social system, whilst it is possible to deduce all sorts of philosophical, scientific and ethical consequences from contemplation, such will not in itself help to understand the class relationships in the existing order (Horkheimer 1978: 45). This is because differences in human character, as is the case in the family, are related to the various epochs of history (Horkheimer 1978: 55).

For Horkheimer, historical struggles improve justice and fate. When the words justice, precise and specific qualities are demanded – absolute justice as an absolute truth is unthinkable (Horkheimer 1978: 32). In practical life, consciousness let humans act in accordance with beliefs. Humans must be aware of their fate since the onslaughts of the hardening of the spirit today, will not guarantee their freedom (Horkheimer 1978: 44). The advice given to the peaceful citizen to survive all the dangers of the class struggle is not to antagonize the reactionaries. In order not to fall prey to any dangers one can (as Horkheimer did), leave the country (Horkheimer 1978: 45) in order to escape persecution.

In 'present-day' Germany, Horkheimer wrote, people blame the revolutionary party more for its inadequate performance (action) than for its goals (theory). Its leadership gets condemned when their proletarian action fails (Horkheimer 1978: 39). At his historical juncture, millions of people are suppressed and tormented in the world. Someone who is associated with the revolutionary party and whose theoretical and active involvement with it, needs to criticize the leaders. Political will is necessary to remove the obstacles and to ensure that the leaders have not monopolized the power in the party at the expense of the masses (Horkheimer 1978: 40). Although contemporary theatre and pseudo-revolutionary plays reflect struggles in the real world and help to create an atmosphere of action, they do not have a lasting revolutionary effect (Horkheimer 1978: 54).

Conclusion

Horkheimer's 'historical situation' refers to the already present and past conditions that are characteristic of what he wanted to describe without necessarily being confined to their literal meaning. For instance, it could be the 'present', or 'today', or of his 'age' or 'bourgeois epoch'. But 'today' was more than just that one day and 'present' sometimes stretched over months or years. It is the same for the words such as 'age' or 'epoch', for instance.

Horkheimer's sense of time in history tested the artificial human-made barriers in (of) time: it is like drawing a figure in the desert sand – only to be obliterated by the wind in time. This then leads to the question: if time correlates to historical situation, what happens when the winds of change blow over it? The collection words (terms) that Horkheimer use to refer to unique distinct entities of historical situations, are best viewed as philosophical moments in the constant, already present.

Bibliography

- Abromeit, J. 2011. *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Adorno, T.W. 2007. *Negative Dialectics*. (Translated by E.B. Ashron.) Continuum Publishing Company, New York and London.
- Althusser, L. and E. Balibar. 2009. *Reading Capital*. (Translated by B. Brewster.) Verso, London and New York.
- Benhabid, S., W. Bonß and J. McCole (eds.) 1993. *On Max Horkheimer. New Perspectives*. The MIT Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London.
- Carr, E.H. 1974. *What is History?* Reprint. Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth.
- Fukuyama, F. 2006. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press, New York.
- Engelbrecht, C. 2012. 'Marx's Theory of Colonisation and Contemporary Eastern Cape (South Africa) Historiography.' [www://http.independent.academia.edu/christoengelbrecht/papers](http://http.independent.academia.edu/christoengelbrecht/papers), pp.1–17. [Accessed on 13 August 2016.]
- Engelbrecht, C. 2014a. 'Max Horkheimer's Problems with Science, Technology and Hope.' [www://http.independent.academia.edu/christoengelbrecht/papers](http://http.independent.academia.edu/christoengelbrecht/papers), pp.1–17. [Accessed on 12 September 2016.]
- Engelbrecht, C. 2014b. 'Max Horkheimer's Concept of 'Suffering''. [www://http.independent.academia.edu/christoengelbrecht/papers](http://http.independent.academia.edu/christoengelbrecht/papers), pp.1–22. [Accessed on 20 October 2016.]
- Engelbrecht, C. 2014c. 'Globalization Theory and Reference to Aspects of Eastern Cape (South Africa) History.' [www://http.independent.academia.edu/christoengelbrecht/papers](http://http.independent.academia.edu/christoengelbrecht/papers), pp.1–15. [Accessed on 21 August 2016.]
- Engelbrecht, C. 2015. 'Max Horkheimer's Early Views of the German Working Class.' [www://http.independent.academia.edu/christoengelbrecht/papers](http://http.independent.academia.edu/christoengelbrecht/papers), pp.1–62. [Accessed on 5 June 2015.]
- Gardiner, P. (ed.) 1978. *The Philosophy of History*. Reprint. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Hegel, G.W.F. 2004. *The Philosophy of History*. Reissue. (Preface by C. Hegel. Introduction by the translator J. Sibree. Introduction to the Dover Edition by C.J. Friedrich.) Dover Publications, Inc.,
-

- New York.
- Horkheimer, M. 1972. *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*. (Translated by M.J. O'Connell and others). A Continuum Book, The Seabury Press, New York.
- Horkheimer, M. 1978. *Dawn and Decline. Notes 1926–1931 and 1950–1969*. (Translated by M. Shaw, with an Afterword by E. Gebhardt.) A Continuum Book. The Seabury Press, New York.
- Horkheimer, M. 1993. *Between Philosophy and Social Science. Selected Early Writings*. (Translated by G.F. Hunter, M.S. Kramer and J. Torpey. Introduction by G.F. Hunter.) The MIT Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London.
- Horkheimer, M. 2007. *A Life in Letters. Selected Correspondence*. (Edited, translated and with an introduction by M.R. Jacobson and E.M. Jacobson.) University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London.
- Horkheimer, M. and T. Adorno. 2002. *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*. (Edited by G. S. Noerr and E. Jephcott.) Stanford University Press, Stanford.
- Jay, M. 1996. *The Dialectical Imagination. A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923–1950*. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London.
- Kant, I. 2005. *Introduction to Logic*. (Translated by T.K. Abbott. Introduction by D. Sweet.) Barnes & Noble, New York.
- Meyerhoff, H. (ed.) 1959. *The Philosophy of History in Our Time. An Anthology*. Doubleday Anchor Books, New York.
- Passmore, J. 1966. *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.
- Popper, K. 2007. *The Poverty of Historicism*. Routledge Classics, London and New York.
- Popper, K. 2009a. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. (Reprint.) Routledge Classics, London and New York.
- Popper, K. 2009b. *Conjectures and Refutations. The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. (Reprint.) Routledge Classics, London and New York.
- Schaff, A. 1976. *History and Truth*. Pergamon Press, Oxford.
- Schmidt, J. 1998. 'Language, Mythology, and Enlightenment: Historical Notes on Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*', in *Social Review*, 65: 4, pp.807–833.)
- Schönle, A. 2008. 'Ruins and History. Observations on Russian Approaches to Destruction and Decay', in *Slavic Review*. (Interdisciplinary Quarterly of Russian, Eurasian and East European Studies), Vol.65, Issue 4, Abstracts. <http://www.slavicreview.illinois.edu/indexes/vol65/abstracts4.html> [Accessed on 9 December 2016.]
-